

Antiwar activists split on Ukraine

Minnesota's peace groups oppose U.S. aid, causing conflict in their ranks.

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Minnesota's robust antiwar groups have been staging demonstrations opposing American military aid to Ukraine in its war with Russia, calling on Western nations to press for a cease-fire and warning that the conflict could lead to World War III.

But now some within the groups are rebelling against those messages, sharply dividing the ranks.

"There have to be alternative methods, and the U.S. claim that the only choice is armed war is a lie," said Kristin Dooley, director of Minneapolis-based Women Against Military Madness (WAMM). Meredith Aby, a spokeswoman for the Anti-War Committee, said Ukrainians are being used "as pawns in a conflict between the United States/NATO and Russia."

Those positions are under fire from some activists within the peace groups' own ranks. They say that opposing American military aid and blaming the U.S. and NATO for provoking Vladimir Putin into invading Ukraine gives cover to Russia's war of aggression against the Ukrainian people.

"From the beginning of the invasion, Putin has been systematically bombing civilian areas," said Terry Burke, a former WAMM board member. "Russia has been forcibly transferring citizens to Russia,

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Crowds fill St. Paul's iconic avenue for the return of one of the city's most popular summertime events



A GRAND DAY FOR FESTIVAL'S RETURN

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After a three-year hiatus, Grand Old Day — St. Paul's beloved 50-year-old hootenanny along storied Grand Avenue — returned with a hesitant start Sunday as crowds lining the street politely clapped for the fire trucks and politicians moseying past.

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar padded by in sneakers, waving. Mayor Melvin Carter jogged behind her. Kids gobbled up candy from the street — to the chagrin of parents. Then, City Council Member Rebecca Noecker called out to supporters at the corner of Grand and Saratoga Street with a fitting prediction.

"The politicians are almost gone," declared Noecker, who represents the city's Second Ward. "The fun stuff is coming."

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Photos by JERRY HOLT • jerry.holt@startribune.com

Lyshia Hollie, above left; son Cairo, 2; and friend Anastasia Cannedy joined the crowds enjoying the return of St. Paul's Grand Old Day after a three-year absence.

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Scuffle linked to rebellion in ranks

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which is a war crime.... Putin's war is genocidal."

The division over U.S. policy came to a head three weeks ago in south Minneapolis, when a scuffle erupted outside a meeting hall where **Medea Benjamin** was appearing in a forum sponsored by **WAMM** and the local chapter of **Veterans for Peace**. Benjamin is a co-founder of Code Pink, a national peace group that's calling for an immediate cease-fire in Ukraine.

"There are excellent, principled, caring people on both sides," Burke said. "It's unfortunate that there was a physical altercation. That was not what we sought in organizing the protest."

Outside the meeting hall, Benjamin used her cellphone to shoot video of **Kieran Knutson**, an activist protesting her appearance. When someone took Benjamin's phone, Veterans for Peace activist **Craig Wood** said he waded into the crowd to retrieve it and was pushed or fell to the ground, where he was pummeled by two individuals. His arm was dislocated and will require surgery, he said.

Police were called, but there were no arrests.

"I have never experienced the level of aggressiveness and violence that I experienced in Minneapolis, and I have been to 70 cities," Benjamin said in an interview. "Who would have thought Minnesota nice? Minnesota not nice."

Knutson, a telecommunications worker at AT&T and president of CWA Local 7250, said Benjamin and WAMM aren't listening to civil organizations in Ukraine that support resistance to the Russian invasion.

"Medea Benjamin is the main purveyor of Putin's justification for invasion on the U.S. [political] left," Knutson said. "The people of Ukraine have a right to independence and self-determination. ... I don't think there should be an arms embargo against people who are fighting back."

Activists on both sides are



Provided by Women Against Military Madness

Protesters opposed to sending U.S. military aid to Ukraine demonstrated recently in St. Paul.

planning events this summer to promote their views. **Emmett Doyle**, an antiwar Minneapolis folk singer who sang at the Benjamin protest last month, will host a concert next week at St. Cloud Unitarian Universalist Fellowship to raise funds for solidarity collectives in Ukraine.

On the other side, the Minnesota Peace Action Coalition has scheduled a demonstration for early August near Loring Park. Its slogans include "Stop the U.S./ NATO proxy war in Ukraine" and "Not one more dollar for the war — negotiation not escalation."

Fissures are apparent

Going back to the Vietnam War and extending to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, antiwar groups in the United States have sometimes disagreed on protest tactics but have been fairly united in opposing U.S. military interventions. While many antiwar groups oppose the U.S. role in Ukraine, fissures are apparent.

Bill Fletcher, former president of TransAfrica Forum and a former AFL-CIO staffer, is co-founder of the Ukrainian Solidarity Network, a coalition that supports the Ukrainian national resistance. He has debated Benjamin on the subject.

"Medea Benjamin is a friend of mine, but we don't agree at

all," he said.

Fletcher said antiwar groups argue that Putin was "a stupid chump" who was pushed into attacking Ukraine by the expansion of NATO. He said they ignore the fact that eastern European countries lobbied to join NATO, reflecting their long history of Russian domination.

Fletcher said the antiwar groups also overlook Putin's statement in 2021 that Ukraine did not have a right to exist. He said Putin wants to create a Slavic bloc of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. An independent Ukraine, he said, is a problem for the Russian leader.

"For people like Medea, and those who go further than Medea — who say no weaponry at all [for Ukraine] — they are calling for surrender of Ukraine," he said. "They should just come out and say that, and stop bobbing and weaving."

Benjamin disagrees. "Sending more weapons will only fuel this war," she said. "If we really cared about the Ukrainian people, we would stop this."

Benjamin said American leaders should listen to other countries that are proposing peace negotiations, such as China and Brazil. She noted Biden's own comment that Putin needs an off-ramp.

"Maybe the U.S. could

compromise on the issue of provocative U.S. bases in Poland and Romania, maybe there could be a re-upping of an arms agreement," she said. Perhaps Crimea, illegally annexed by Russia in 2014, should be left in Russian hands, she added, "until we can have an independently monitored referendum."

Mike McDonald, secretary of the local chapter of Veterans for Peace, said he's not a fan of Putin's. But he called the Ukraine conflict a proxy war.

"We, the United States, are trying to weaken Russia and letting Ukrainians fight that war for us," he said. "Our big message is we want to stop the war and save the planet."

Steve McKeown, a founder of the local Veterans for Peace chapter and its newsletter coordinator, has a view that was reflected in a large sign he brought to the protest outside Benjamin's talk: "Respect the Ukraine resistance against the Russian war."

McKeown said he's not against what Veterans for Peace opponents of U.S. aid are saying, just concerned about what they are not saying.

"They're not calling out Russia enough," he said. "They are not saying, [Russia] must leave now."

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